

Overcoming the barriers to manager empowerment

A blueprint for empowering line managers and
freeing HR teams to focus on strategic priorities.



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Introduction

Why line manager empowerment is vital

Strategic, business-driven HR functions are crucial for an organisation to achieve its long-term goals. The role of HR is to develop and embed the people strategies that support an organisation's strategic objectives and foster a positive, people-first working environment. However, many organisations still rely too heavily on HR to support tactical people management, leaving little time to focus on the strategic aspects of employee engagement to achieve business success.

This whitepaper aims to identify the barriers to empowering line managers and how to overcome them so that managers can confidently manage more employee relations matters, freeing HR to focus on creating business-driven HR functions.



Empowering managers is a top priority

Freeing up HR professionals to focus on strategic priorities has been identified as a top HR trend in 2023 by various media outlets. This is reinforced by AdviserPlus [research](#) that shows, according to 220 C-Suite and HR managers, empowering managers to take greater ownership of people matters is number one on their priority list in any HR transformation initiative.

Rank these statements in order of importance in any HR transformation initiatives undertaken within your business.



Findings from 2022 AdviserPlus HR Transformation Conundrum survey of 220 C-Suite and HR Managers in 1,000+ sized organisations.

“Line managers are our first line of attack and defence when it comes to engaging employees, so they need to be well versed in the objectives of our people strategies and well trained to deliver employee experiences that build a deeper emotional commitment to the organisation. To do this well, we need to empower managers to handle more employee relations matters.”

Yvonne Wilcock, CEO, Empowering People Group and AdviserPlus

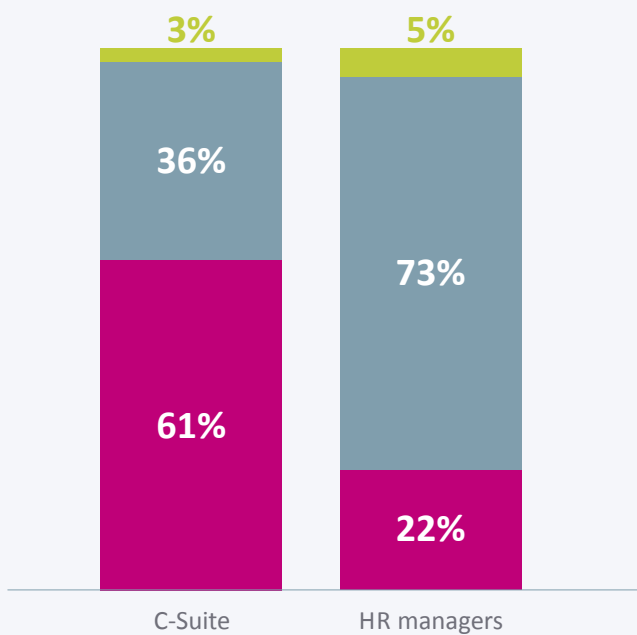
The benefits of line manager empowerment are far reaching:

- Enabling managers to build closer, more personal relationships with their direct reports, which helps improve employee engagement and retention.
- Giving managers the confidence and competence to respond appropriately in the moment when people matters arise, helping to improve employee relationships.
- Freeing HR teams from tactical employee relations tasks don't require a specialist skillset, giving HR more time to focus on high-value, business-critical priorities.

Although the benefits are significant, empowering managers requires careful planning, clear processes, technology enablement and training, in order to avoid creating risk and additional pressure on overstretched managers.

Alarming, the [research](#) findings suggest that managers are under-trained to manage employee relations matters, yet they are responsible for a significant proportion of ER tasks. Where managers lack the necessary skills and experience to deal with ER management, such as grievances, long-term absence and performance issues, HR are likely to be pulled into more people matters than necessary.

Select the statement that best reflects your organisation regarding training to increase the skills and/or capabilities of managers.



- Managers are not provided with any training to handle employee relations issues
- Managers are provided with some training but not enough
- Managers are provided with the right level of training to handle employee relations matters

The C-suite have a far more positive view of line manager training. This gulf in opinion is a major conundrum for leaders of transformation initiatives and it needs to be urgently addressed.

An accurate understanding of the capability and training needs of line managers is required before it's possible to effectively empower managers.



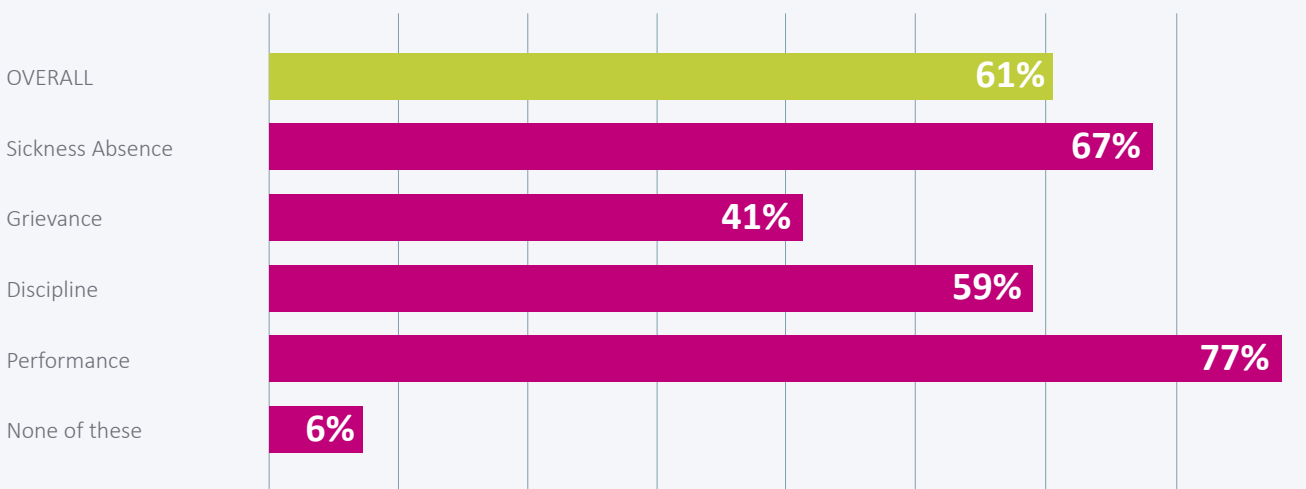
Findings from 2022 AdviserPlus HR Transformation Conundrum survey of 220 C-Suite and HR Managers in 1,000+ sized organisations.

Managers deal with ER matters without the necessary skills

Line managers are largely directly responsible for performance management (77%), which comes as little surprise, but less than half have direct responsibility for grievances (41%).

If we look at the response to this question in the context of the earlier question about training, if **61%** believe line managers take direct responsibility for employee relations issues but only **40%** believe they are sufficiently trained, that **21%** delta means there is a risk of employee relations being poorly managed.

Line managers take direct responsibility for:



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To address this issue, organisations must equip line managers with the necessary skills through training and knowledge transfer, while also providing access to resources and technology to enable line managers to self-serve more employee relations tasks in a risk-managed way.

But there are significant barriers that stand in the way of effective line manager empowerment, which need to be urgently addressed to optimise HR transformation.






Changing mindsets to remove the barriers

Many of the perceived barriers may actually be a resistance to change, so understanding and addressing the root cause of each barrier is vital. This following section delves into some of the barriers identified within the [research](#) to prioritise how organisations can address them.

01 Budget constraints

A major obstacle to HR transformation and empowering line managers to handle ER issues is often cited as a budget constraint, as there is a perception that this will be a costly investment. But stalling investment is a false economy when you factor in the positive impact manager empowerment has on productivity, efficiencies in HR's cost to serve, and the reduction in case duration and escalation to employment tribunal situations.

Organisations that have led the charge in enabling manager empowerment have seen significant cost efficiencies. According to ER analytics data cited [here](#), organisations that have undergone employee relations transformation have realised the following benefits:

-  **31% reduction in formal case duration**, reducing lost productivity hours for those involved in an ER case
-  **62% reduction in ER case advisory team profile**, whilst uplifting service quality and engagement
-  **71% reduction in tribunal claims** from early and appropriate manager intervention, consistent processes and robust audit trails
-  **£2.5m annual saving in reduced absence rates** through proactive management by line managers. As illustrated in this [United Utilities](#) case study.
-  **29% increase in manager confidence** in managing their direct reports that has a direct impact on employee engagement

Read more about the efficiencies driven by the **empower**[®] solution in this [Virgin Atlantic](#) case study.

If line managers are equipped with the right tools and training to self-serve more employee relations matters, the investment will pay for itself many times over. The impact will be improved employee experiences and performance, which contributes to the overall health of the organisation and, ultimately, improves the bottom line.

“By identifying people issues and risks at an early stage, the service helps line managers to deal with people issues confidently, independently and drive performance improvement.”

Business Services Director, United Utilities

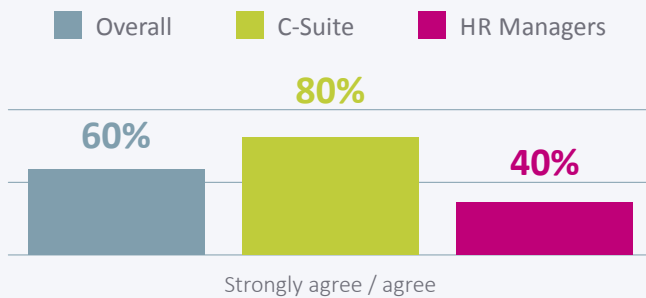
Overcoming the barrier

The key to overcoming the barrier of the perception of prohibitive costs is to clearly identify where there are inefficiencies, inconsistencies and risk in your current ER processes. Set clear benchmarks for improving KPIs, leveraging data insights and monitoring improvements to demonstrate tangible returns.

It's evident from the statistics above that manager empowerment is necessary to successfully free up HR to focus on strategy, so HR leaders need to invest in the training, technology and resources to effectively support managers to self-serve ER matters.

02 Insufficient manager capacity and capability

Managers in our organisation have the skills and/or capabilities to successfully manage employee relations issues



Just 3 in 5 respondents believe that managers have the capability to successfully manage employee relations matters, and the opinion of HR managers is even more pessimistic, with only 40% agreeing that managers have the necessary skills and capabilities.

Line managers already have large remits and are often overstretched, so capacity is also a considerable issue, especially when you factor in the complexity managers are facing in managing employees across hybrid working environments.

Empowering managers to deal with more employee relations issues directly is important because this is a fundamental part of their role as a people leader.

Giving managers the tools and skills to self-serve with confidence

Self-serving ER matters that managers have previously passed on to HR can be daunting as there may be fear of making a mistake. This fear can cause managers to hesitate when dealing with employee relations matters in the moment, which can exacerbate an issue and lead to employee disengagement. Overcoming this requires investment in tools, resources and training to ensure managers have the confidence to respond appropriately, consistently and compliantly when issues arise.

It should also be clearly communicated that HR are still there as the safety net, but that many employee relations matters do not need their immediate involvement. Defining governance and clearly explaining the safety measures in place to ensure issues that need to be escalated to HR are done so in a timely and appropriate manner is also vital to success and building manager confidence.

The startling difference of opinion of manager capability between the C-suite and HR managers, demonstrates the need for HR to take a well-planned and strategic approach to empowering managers and communicating the benefits to get both business leader and manager buy in. HR leaders need to champion to the C-suite the need for appropriate budget to be allocated to the right resources and training to set managers up for success.

Ultimately, a line manager's role is to manage people, which should include ER matters, but when they don't have the time, tools or sufficient training to do so effectively, it can increase the risk of manager overwhelm.

An over-reliance on HR to be involved in all ER matters, which is commonplace in many organisations, is not sustainable in the experience culture we live in and it erodes the ability of managers to effectively manage.

Another capability issue to address is the fact that effective ER transformation will require managers to use self-service technology. As digital transformation continues at pace, with new platforms continually emerging and promising to transform ways of working, managers are increasingly asked to do more with a myriad self-service tools, but these don't necessarily all make work easier. In some instances, multiple, siloed systems add further complexity to managers' roles and can result in duplication of data and actions. As a result, managers can easily become overwhelmed with competing priorities, resulting in disengagement and reduced productivity.

It's essential to choose a fit-for-purpose solution that enhances managers' capabilities. When introducing a new technology that is fit-for-purpose, managers need to be engaged early in how it is designed to understand how the technology reduces complexity and genuinely improve ways of working.

Ideally, any working parties involved in selecting the right solution should include representation from the line manager cohort so that their views and requirements are considered. This will help to ensure the tools are adopted well and championed by the end users.

Training managers to confidently manage

Training to embed new ways of working is essential to the success of any transformation initiative, but it's also vital to provide managers with the right training to effectively manage their direct reports. There are often instances where employees are promoted into manager roles but aren't given the training to ensure they become successful people managers. A lot is asked of our managers, but the research cited earlier shows that organisations don't necessarily provide the right level of training to support them.

Without this, managers are more likely to lack confidence, mis-step employee relations issues and become overwhelmed. This will have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing, productivity and the experience of the teams they manage.

Even experienced managers are facing more complexity in their roles with hybrid and remote workforces and the ever-evolving needs of employees. New legislation and the need to create more diverse, equitable working environments all add to the requirements of managers to be well trained.

Learning needs to be tailored, easy to digest and delivered in a way that engages a modern and often dispersed workforce, so trends in digital and micro-learning are key to shaping training and development programmes that keep your managers informed and skilled in people management.

Overcoming the barrier

To overcome the barrier of manager capacity and capability, HR leaders need to ensure that tools selected to enable line manager self-service are designed to improve ways of working and reduce the complexity in managing people matters. If a tool doesn't enhance productivity and improve ways of working, it's unlikely to be embraced by those intended to benefit from it, resulting in a risk that it won't deliver the required return on the investment.

HR leaders must clearly communicate the benefits of manager empowerment and demonstrate practically how they will

support managers to build closer emotional connections with their direct reports in a consistent and risk-controlled way.

Investing in training is an essential part of addressing the capability issue and delivering better outcomes. This touches both managers' skills in people management, but also in the use of any new technology. Onboarding training must also feel empowering. If technology and new processes are introduced, they will only be successful if end users are adequately trained to use them in a way that engages them and demonstrates the benefits in real-world scenarios.

“It may be a simple analogy, but you can't hand over the keys to a new car and expect a person to successfully navigate the journey ahead without first teaching them how to drive!”

explains Michael Campbell, Commercial Director, AdviserPlus

When managers are well equipped to follow timely, consistent and efficient processes, they can develop a better understanding of HR policies and procedures, which in turn can improve their ability to manage their teams effectively. By implementing clear, easy to follow processes for addressing employee relations matters, organisations can quickly embed new ways of working that allow issues to be dealt with promptly and effectively, helping to reduce the volume of issues that accelerate to formal management.

The **empower**[®] solution from AdviserPlus has enabled businesses like Virgin Atlantic, BT, Sainsbury's, Currys, and many more to empower their managers to handle more of these issues directly. This has delivered significant business benefits, such as reduced long term sickness absence rates and more grievances being resolved before they have to be escalated to HR. These are business-changing benefits that demonstrate the value of enabling line managers to manage more of the employee relationship.








03 The dominance of one-size-fits all technology

Another key barrier to manager empowerment is the proliferation of one-size-fits-all technologies that are not fit for the purpose of enabling manager self-service of employee relations management. Often businesses use helpdesk or similar ticketing systems to manage ER matters, but these are not designed to enable managers to self-serve in a consistent and risk-controlled way nor deliver actionable insights, so reliance falls on HR to get involved in people matters that would not require their input if handled effectively at source.

There are many monolithic tools used by HR teams to manage people matters, which simplify and automate some processes in ER case management, but these tools are often inflexible and have not been designed specifically for the complexity that comes with managing employee relations issues. They may also lack the analytics to deliver a data-driven approach to decision-making when it comes to people matters. Organisations need a build-for-purpose case management system which allows relevant data to be captured. It's essential that HR teams have visibility of ER data and analytics to help surface the root cause of issues and identify where there are potential problem areas, such as teams with high absence rates, reports of conduct issues or where line managers are underperforming.

Where tools are not fit for purpose, this can lead to individual teams or managers developing workarounds to make their tasks easier, or not tackling issues at all because it's too hard to manage them effectively. This creates a lack of consistency and exposes the business to risk.

The key attributes of a fit-for-purpose solution for empowering managers are:

-  The system is implemented and maintained by employee relations process experts who can ensure your people processes have been optimised to guild managers to do the right thing at the right time.
-  It's been designed to enable managers to take ownership of day-to-day people matters and hand off to HR when issues become complex and where HR can add the most value and expertise.
-  It promotes a consistent, transparent and fair application of people processes across the organisation.
-  It uplifts the capability of managers in the ownership of people matters.
-  It automates actions, approvals and task notifications to reduce the administrative burden of managing employee relations tasks, helping to deliver consistent and timely actions.
-  It gives the organisation visibility, oversight and actionable insights off the back of line managers' interventions.
-  It is flexible and configurable as requirements change, processes evolve and manager capability increases.

A LEADING RETAILER
IMPLEMENTED
empower[®]
AND WITHIN 3 MONTHS
OF LAUNCH,
88%
OF EMPLOYEE RELATIONS TASKS
WERE MANAGER-LED,
FREEING HR TO FOCUS ON
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES.

As leading experts in the field, AdviserPlus gain insight from speaking to HR leaders on a daily basis and note a growing resistance to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to both people management and technology. As a consequence, there's a conscious move to employee-experience-orientated solutions by best-in-class experts. Organisations need integrated, built-for-purpose technology that supports the management of employee relations issues in the moment.

Organisations that implement a specialised ER case management system can realise significant savings that write off the initial cost outlay of investing in the technology. Here are just a few stats from **empower®** data that illustrate this:

75%

Cost reduction from outsourcing to the AdviserPlus advice line

£2.5m

Annual saving delivered by proactive sickness absence management

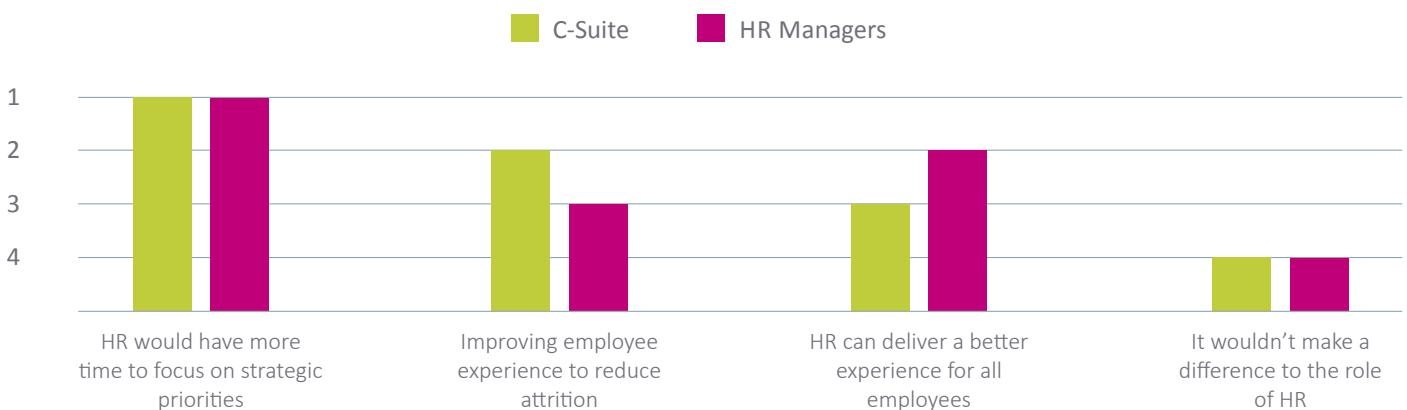
32%

Reduction in case duration, reducing the impact on productivity

Reduce reliance on HR for tactical deliver to free HR teams to focus on strategy

According to the research cited earlier, the number one benefit of manager empowerment identified by both the C-suite and HR managers is “HR would have more time to focus on strategic priorities”. This is a strong argument for the benefits of empowering line managers. It not only reduces the day-to-day burden on HR teams so that they can focus on the more human and strategic aspects of their roles, but it also enables line managers to build closer relationships with their direct reports, helping to develop an emotional commitment to the organisations which will improve employee retention.

Rank the statements in order of impact if managers led more day-to-day employee relations tasks in your organisation, with 1 being the highest



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Overcoming the barrier

In order to truly achieve manager empowerment, organisations need to ensure the investment in technology enhances manager performance by enabling them to quickly and efficiently respond to their team’s needs in the moment. With managers self-serving more employee relations matters, HR are able to spend more time identifying potential areas for improvement and developing people-first strategies that align with business goals and proactively create a more agile, resilient and healthy workforce.

“Technology is most effective when it enables us to be more human in our role. One of the biggest benefits our customers realise from manager empowerment is that it not only frees talented HR people to focus on more strategic, complex matters, it also enables line managers to build closer connections with their teams, which is a vital component of an effective employee engagement strategy.”

Yvonne Wilcock, CEO, Empowering People Group and AdviserPlus

04 Breaking habits

Another significant barrier to empowering line managers is trying to break the usual routine and behaviours of line managers, HR and the organisation as a whole.

These deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour can't be changed overnight, and they require the buy-in of everyone to effectively manage the change process.

There may be some resistance from front-line HR team members who may be reluctant to lose the manager hand-holding for fear of moving to responsibilities that may be more challenging or outside of their comfort zone. HR leaders need to ensure their own managers wholly embrace the change and lead from the front, helping to avoid old habits from returning.

Manager empowerment is not about taking HR away from using the specialist people skills they are trained in, but it is about reducing the time spent on low-value issues that specialist skills are not required for. This means that HR have more time to focus their energy on complex matters that do require their expertise, and it also enables them to spend more time identifying the root cause of recurring issues. This approach optimises the use of the skills of talented HR teams and enables them to develop and continually improve employee engagement strategies for the good of both the business and its people.

Overcoming the barrier

Building a culture of trust while safeguarding managers is vital to the success of manager empowerment initiatives.

There may also be fear of having line managers lead on ER matters, so it's vital that the change process is carefully planned to include the right governance and safeguards to prevent mismanagement, and that these are clearly articulated to everyone impacted. Without carefully managing the narrative to both HR team members and line managers, there is a risk of resistance that could result in the benefits taking longer to be realised. However, with the right tools, training, safeguards and analytics in place, HR will quickly see the benefits.

There may also be a risk that handing over the reins on ER tasks devalues the expertise and role of HR. However, by freeing up HR's time to focus on the strategic elements of their role, such as driving long term business goals, HR strategy, and people plans, it will quickly become evident to HR how they are better able to contribute to the success of the business as a whole.

05 The complexity of ER management

The ability to empower line managers in dealing with ER issues is often hindered by the perception that the issues are too complex for them to deal with. However, simplifying ER processes and enabling line managers to follow them can benefit the organisation by freeing up resources, reducing risk, and fostering positive employee relationships.



As managers are those closest to their direct reports' day-to-day roles and experiences, they are best placed to understand any issues that an employee may be facing. With clear processes that guide line managers through how to respond to employees ER issues, managers can be confident that they are doing the right thing and the employee will experience a consistent approach that helps to reassure them that their manager can effectively support them.

These stats show how manager empowerment that enables a proactive approach to employee relations reduces the duration of cases. This demonstrates how reducing the complexity and standardising the approach to managing ER matters delivers tangible benefits that help to reduce the impact of ER cases on productivity.

Where organisations are unionised, good communication is even more important

Organisations that are heavily unionised may view empowering line managers to manage employee relations as unachievable, as there is a perceived risk that unions may be resistant to the change if the benefit to the employee isn't clear. The right ER transformation solution will improve ways of working, help protect managers from the risk of mismanaging employee relations matters, and also improve employee experiences all round. It is therefore vital to engage union representatives early and ensure the benefits are clearly communicated so it's clear how they satisfy the requirements of unions to protect worker's rights.

Consulting with unions about their fears and risks and ensuring that the solution addresses them positively will be beneficial. Ultimately, line managers are also employees, and the goal is to equip them well to handle ER issues effectively and be able to do their job to the best of their ability.

Overcoming the barrier

To overcome the barrier of handing over responsibility of complex processes to line managers again comes down to ensuring that managers are effectively safeguarded and equipped with the right tools and training to ensure they feel genuinely empowered to improve employee relationships. Although there will always be unforeseen challenges in embedding any new process, effective planning, change management and communication is vital to success.

“As HR teams navigate today's rapidly evolving and complex landscape, while

fire-fighting the talent shortage, record sickness levels and the impact of the current economic climate, the task of empowering line managers to do more can feel too complex and daunting. But an effective employee relations management solution will quickly deliver tangible benefits and enable HR to become more business-driven, which is essential to survival.”

*Explains Michael Campbell,
Commercial Director, AdviserPlus*

Conclusion

Manager empowerment is not something that progressive organisations can afford to delay. As organisations face tightening budgets and many are facing workforce reductions, line manager empowerment becomes a more urgent priority to protect productivity and employee engagement. With the fight for talent continuing to impact so many organisations, equipping line managers to manage their teams more effectively is essential to reduce impactful ER matters and improve employee retention.

When approaching vendors and service providers to support manager empowerment, it's key to identify solutions that

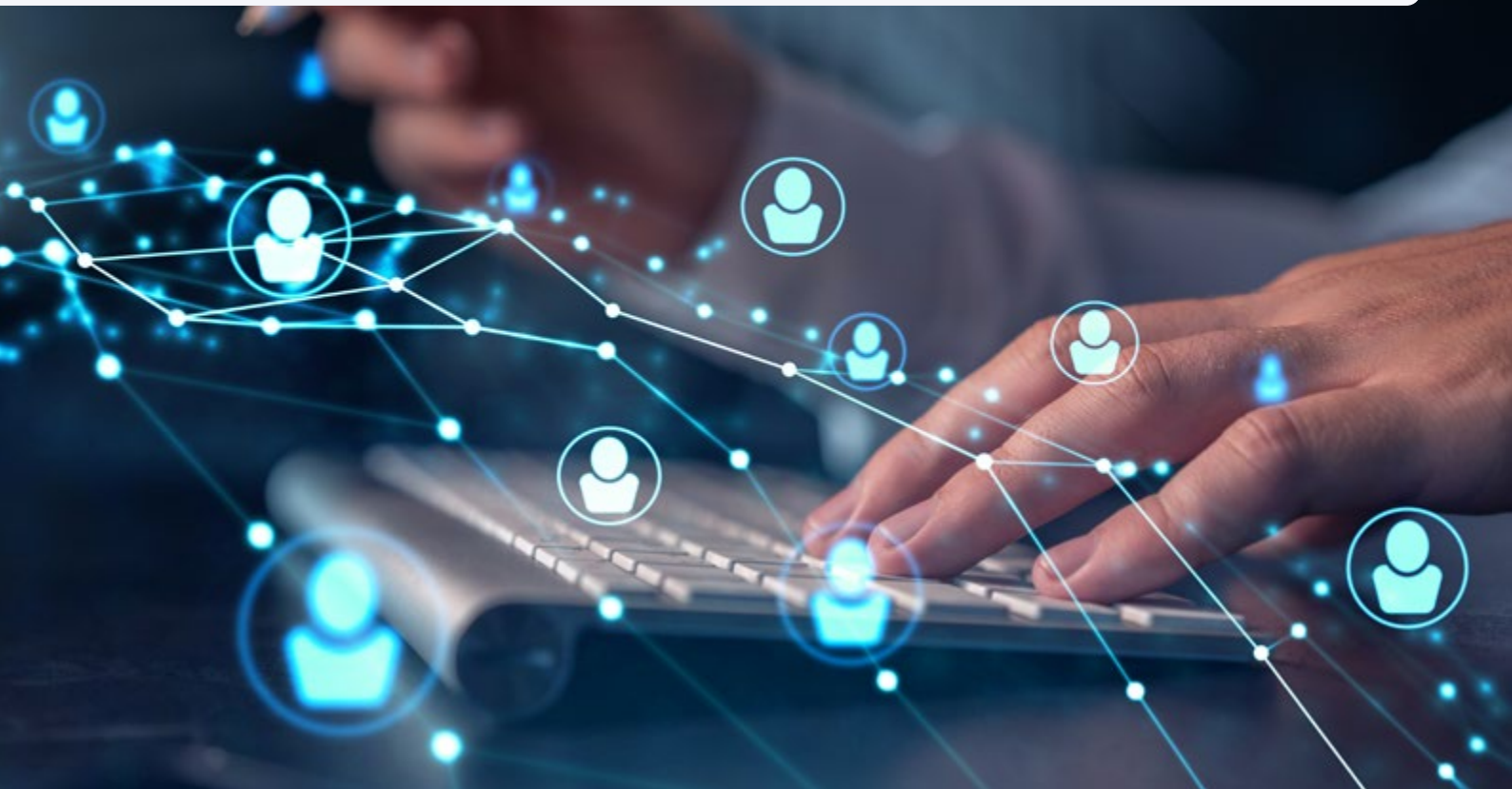
simplify the complexity in ER. Digitalising people processes and integrating advice, guidance and coaching will support managers to do the right thing at the right time.

When choosing the technology to equip managers to self-serve, choose a solution that is fit-for-purpose and improves ways of working. One-size-fits-all simply won't do.

Removing barriers to manager empowerment is essential for organisations to improve productivity, employee experiences and the overall health and resilience of the business and its workforce.

“Manager empowerment provides the solution to many of the issues faced by HR teams in the current climate, but there are significant barriers to overcome. HR leaders need to face these head on and be the leaders of change to create cultures where managers and employees can thrive.”

Yvonne Wilcock, CEO, Empowering People Group and AdviserPlus.



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